

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10821-8 - The Political Philosophy of the British Idealists: Selected Studies

Peter P. Nicholson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

I first began to study the political philosophy of the British Idealists more than a quarter of a century ago. From textbooks and commentaries I had gained the impression that the Idealists' ideas were usually wrong-headed and better forgotten. However, as I read more of what they had actually written, I decided much of their low reputation was unfair and undeserved. Certain key doctrines had first been mutilated by taking them out of context and then distorted by unsympathetic analysis which displayed them in the worst possible light. The British Idealists have had a better reception since then, but they still lie under the shadow of the narrow and hostile verdict imposed by their early critics. This book is intended as a contribution to the reassessment of their political philosophy.

The group of philosophers known as the British Idealists or British Hegelians was prominent approximately from the mid-1870s until the First World War. Its main figures are T. H. Green, Edward Caird, F. H. Bradley, and Bernard Bosanquet. I am not concerned equally with all aspects of their thought but concentrate on their political philosophy and such of their moral philosophy as is indispensable for understanding their ideas on politics. Green receives the most attention because he made major contributions to political philosophy. Bosanquet's importance, in my view, lies in his elaboration and augmentation of Green's ideas. Caird and Bradley wrote relatively little about politics directly; nonetheless Bradley's work in moral philosophy is central and worth exploration. Many of the other members of the group, which was largely composed of former pupils of Green and Caird, dealt with politics to some extent. It is not agreed precisely who should be considered British Idealists, so I cite only writers whose credentials are strong and who discussed issues of political philosophy at some length: William Wallace, D. G. Ritchie, R. B. Haldane, John Watson, John MacCunn, J. S. MacKenzie, J. H. Muirhead, Henry Jones, and H. J. W. Hetherington. Others might wish to extend this list, but no one I think would reduce it. These minor British Idealists are not discussed in detail or depth. Their original contributions are for the most part slight: there is some truth in the jibe that they were nothing but "Green parrots". However, it is precisely when they aim simply to preserve and elaborate, or perhaps apply to new circumstances, the lessons learnt from their mentors that these writers sometimes provide helpful clarifications, amplifications, and authentic interpretations. In such cases I have included references to their writings.

There is a large measure of broad agreement about political philosophy

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10821-8 - The Political Philosophy of the British Idealists: Selected Studies

Peter P. Nicholson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

among the British Idealists. They all draw inspiration from common roots in Greek and German thought – above all in Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and Hegel – although they vary somewhat in their emphasis, in particular in being Hegelian to different degrees. (The main debts are indicated in notes, since knowing an argument's provenance can sometimes help one elucidate and assess it.) Again, they share the same view of the nature and purpose of political philosophy: it takes everyday moral and political experience and subjects it to critical reflection. This reflection, which includes distinguishing the rational and valuable aspects of events and developments from the accidental and unimportant, can itself become a factor in the promotion of moral progress. Given these common sources and shared assumptions, it is not surprising that the basic constituents of their political philosophies are the same and their conclusions similar. At a general level, all the British Idealists accept that human beings have to be considered from two viewpoints: as distinct individuals and as members of their society. Each person, viewed as an individual, is a free moral agent capable of directing his or her life, and forming his or her character, in the best way possible. At the same time, each, physically and mentally, is a social being who must live in society with others in order to become a moral person and to enjoy life as an individual. The ultimate good is a morally worthwhile human life. The goal or "end" of each individual, in which he or she will find fulfilment, is to live such a life; and, since the individual is a social being, to live it in company with others and to help them live it too. Correspondingly, the "end" of a society is to have all its members living morally worthwhile lives. The State is society operating in a particular form (through law backed by force) in order to achieve this. A worthwhile life is not something which can be made for an individual, and the individual cannot be forced to live it. The morally good life must be freely chosen by a moral agent if it is to have its value. However, the State can provide the appropriate framework in which individuals have the opportunity to opt for the good life. That, indeed, justifies – and limits – the lawful use of force, and hence particular institutions such as private property or punishment.

There is, in addition, a crucial historical dimension to the British Idealists' political philosophy which is perhaps Hegel's main contribution to it. Human beings' ideas of what is good and of what constitutes a morally worthwhile life are continually developing. So too, therefore, are their ideas of how they as individuals should live, and of what part the society, and above all the State, should play. One corollary is that Idealist political philosophy at any particular time, as found in any philosopher or group, must contain two elements, separable but interdependent. These are: statements of principle and applications of the principles to the specific circumstances of the times. It is often hard to distinguish between them, yet it is essential to do so, because the latter are far more limited and subject to change and revision. It follows that one's own society, and one's own ideas, even if one is a philosopher, are part of the same process and will alter or need revision. One must always

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10821-8 - The Political Philosophy of the British Idealists: Selected Studies

Peter P. Nicholson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

look critically at society and at the corresponding philosophy in order to identify what will require to be changed if progress is to be effected.

This complex of ideas is not unique to the British Idealists. It makes them part of a wider tradition which runs back to Plato. It is distinct from other traditions of political thought. Moreover, it is sharply opposed to those, for instance the social contract and natural rights traditions, which premise the existence of an individual in isolation from society. Idealists have convincing arguments to show that individuals cannot be thought of intelligibly in this way. Their own view, on the other hand, also has distinctive problems. For example, if Idealists are correct in claiming that historically there is moral development in societies as well as in individuals, and that one's moral criteria are derived from contemporary social standards, how is it possible critically to assess one's society and differentiate between what in it is accidental and transient and what is of permanent value? This book discusses some characteristic features of the political philosophy of the British Idealists together with the main problems it confronts. A comprehensive or exhaustive treatment is not attempted. Instead I have selected a relatively small number of topics which I think are both central and contentious (and particularly interesting). I have aimed to counter the main criticisms normally levelled against the British Idealists by presenting a more sympathetic interpretation which suggests that the criticisms are either misconceived or can be answered.

The first study outlines much of the moral theory in Bradley's *Ethical Studies*. This served as a manifesto of British Idealism and became part of its foundations. The principal claim of the study is that Bradley is writing moral philosophy and not the reactionary and authoritarian apologetics for which many castigate him. That misinterpretation is plausible only if Bradley's theory is illegitimately reduced to the content of the essay "My Station and Its Duties"; and even that essay, once it is taken in its proper place in the book as a whole, is found not to deserve the notoriety bestowed on it.

The second study is on one aspect of Green's moral philosophy. Green's moral theory is basically the same as Bradley's, so it is not necessary to examine the whole of it. His concept of the Common Good develops a particular view of human fulfilment or self-realisation which is important for its political implications both in Green's own system of thought and in later Idealist political philosophy. Critics have vigorously attacked Green's Common Good for being muddled and vague. I argue that the criticisms can be met, and that Green has a distinctive and valuable account of the self-realisation by all human beings of their spiritual natures in a non-competitive and cooperative manner. Whereas the distribution of material goods causes competition and conflict, moral goods (such as freedom, properly understood) are not only non-exclusive and therefore non-competitive but also can only be attained cooperatively and universally. However, it does not seem possible to divorce the common development of moral goodness totally from human competition for material goods. Each person is a body existing in a material

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10821-8 - The Political Philosophy of the British Idealists: Selected Studies

Peter P. Nicholson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

world and requiring material goods to satisfy its physical needs: so it seems that competition and conflict must re-emerge in Green's account and cannot be displaced. At this point moral theory has to become political theory.

In order to show how Green copes with the problem left by his moral theory, there are three studies on closely related topics in his political writings. There is a study of his discussion of private property, where he is looking at this very question of the distribution of material goods. I reach two conclusions. First, for Green there are no absolute rights of individuals, because all rights are subordinate to the Common Good. This necessarily applies to property; every person has a right to it, but only to what is necessary for the pursuit of the Common Good, and only on condition that no one satisfies his or her right at the expense of anyone else. Second, the individual's right to property is a right to the opportunity to acquire property rather than a right to receive a certain number of possessions. Now, the idiom of rights presupposes political action to establish and maintain them, so the fifth study is on State action. This is preceded by a study briefly analysing Green's view of freedom and placing it in relation to some current discussions of "negative" and "positive" liberty. The fifth study then explains the role which Green assigns to the State, both as the guardian of rights and as the agency for the creation generally of the material conditions in which human beings can realise themselves morally. Both Green's general principles and their application in the cases of education and the control of the liquor traffic are explored. Green's ideas are compared with those of certain contemporaries, particularly some Utilitarians, and some general conclusions are drawn about Green's inductive approach to politics. His political pragmatism is argued to be consistent with his philosophical idealism.

The sixth and final study deals with Bosanquet's best-known contribution, his analysis of the General Will. I contend that Bosanquet can be defended against the fierce and sometimes overemotional criticisms made of his theory. I also contend that he was correct when he wrote that he was following Bradley and Green closely; sometimes he simply repeats or re-expresses their ideas, and always his argument presupposes theirs and is fully intelligible only in the light of it. The two contentions are linked. Much of the strangeness of Bosanquet's General Will is dissipated as soon as it is connected with the more familiar ideas in Bradley and Green; it also appears more acceptable.

Although the studies tackle different issues in the political philosophy of the British Idealists, they are related. The underlying theme of the book is that the British Idealists do share assumptions and doctrines, and constitute a unified school or tradition of political thought. This emerges especially clearly from the discussion of Bosanquet; but throughout the book I have sought to demonstrate it by citations of particular points where their views coincide. The British Idealists all hold essentially the same political philosophy. Of course they are not unanimous in their opinions or identical in what they cover; one would not expect that of any group containing powerful and original thinkers. But the differences and variations between them are mar-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10821-8 - The Political Philosophy of the British Idealists: Selected Studies

Peter P. Nicholson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

ginal. Undoubtedly a major unifying factor is that all three are deeply impressed by Hegel, who is in my view the predominant philosophical influence upon their political thought. This is probably least clear in the case of Green, but I shall argue that at crucial points he is as Hegelian as Bradley and Bosanquet. Once again, there are citations specifying some of the British Idealists' debts to Hegel. Naturally my emphasis on the unity of the British Idealists' thought leads me to query the interpretation which sets Green on one side and Bradley and Bosanquet on the other and which finds the ideas of the first far more congenial. I believe that in order to understand the political thought of the British Idealists we must extend to Bradley and Bosanquet the same sympathy and charity Green has usually attracted. Their writings are like the panels of a triptych which are associated because they depict different episodes of the same story. They are a unity, and they have to be viewed together.

It will be evident from my handling of the British Idealists' arguments that I have considerable respect for them. I think that their analysis of politics and society goes deeper than the kind of atomistic individualism which they opposed in the nineteenth century and which still flourishes in many quarters. However, individualism takes a different form today: in the history of political thought we find continuities, not repetitions. Similarly the questions facing political thinkers today, whilst related to those which concerned the British Idealists, raise different issues. It may be that the political philosophy of the British Idealists contains responses to Rawls or Nozick, and that it can test the value of socialism or capitalism or the welfare state. However, if there are lessons to be learned from the British Idealists, they are lessons which we shall have to teach ourselves. If their political philosophy does contain general principles which are still applicable, it is we who must apply them to contemporary problems. On the Idealists' own showing, a political philosophy is closely connected to the politics of its own times (see in particular Studies V and VI). Hegel's owl must take flight every dusk; and since it flew for the British Idealists, the landscape and its flora and fauna have altered significantly. The facts of contemporary politics are so changed that one can seldom propose with any confidence how Green or Bosanquet might react. Anyone who thinks that the British Idealists have something valuable to say about politics now, and who wishes to go beyond generalities, faces an immense labour. It would, in my opinion, be well worth undertaking, but it is not the aim of this book. I have tried to read the British Idealists' political philosophy carefully and without prejudice. Benjamin Jowett once wrote: "The true use of interpretation is to get rid of interpretation, and leave us alone in company with the author." I hope to persuade others to read the British Idealists in this spirit and not to treat their writings as repositories of various "errors". For this reason the studies are supported by an extensive bibliography which may serve as an encouragement to, and a tool for, further research.

STUDY I

Bradley's theory of morality

Introduction

An account of the political philosophy of the British Idealists must begin with their moral philosophy. They conceive moral and political philosophy as a single undertaking in which the same matters are dealt with from two viewpoints, the conclusions reached being interdependent. Consequently ideas discussed and elaborated in their moral philosophies are sometimes presupposed, sometimes explicitly introduced, when the British Idealists write about politics. Their political philosophy cannot be fully understood without investigating the main features of their view of morality.

The best introduction to their moral philosophy is Bradley's *Ethical Studies*, published in 1876.¹ This, British Idealism's first full published statement on moral philosophy, contains a general theory of the individual, society, and morality which can be used as a framework for studying the principles and applications of the Idealists' political philosophy. *Ethical Studies* expresses the philosophical stance on morals and politics which is characteristic of British Idealism; and it is typical in drawing heavily on Aristotle and Hegel, opposing central tenets of the Utilitarians, and pointing to the existing social and political institutions as the basic, though not the sole, source of moral duties.

However, *Ethical Studies* is not an easy book. Sidgwick remarked that Bradley, "though he has a considerable turn for smart and epigrammatic writing, hardly possesses the gift of lucid exposition", and two recent commentators say that "Bradley makes little or no concessions to the reader and, at times, at any rate, writes in a most inaccessible manner".² There is some justification for these complaints. Bradley's ideas and terminology are not always immediately accessible, his arguments are often compressed, his intentions and even conclusions are sometimes left implicit, and his irony is open to misunderstanding. Once the high tide of British Idealism had receded, *Ethical Studies* became encrusted with partial interpretations and downright misinterpretations. The principal distortion is particularly relevant to my purposes since it concerns the famous fifth essay, entitled "My Station and Its Duties", where Bradley writes about the State. This part of the book is the most frequently and most disastrously misread. The essay's very title encourages the view that Bradley is preaching a gospel that all persons should accept their station in life and be content to keep their place within the social hierarchy. Bradley's doctrine, most emphatically, this is not. It is a crude misunderstanding which not only twists the theory set out

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10821-8 - The Political Philosophy of the British Idealists: Selected Studies

Peter P. Nicholson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

STUDY I: SECTION 1

in Essay V but also ignores that essay's place in the book's overall structure; and furthermore, and most important, which fails to grasp the philosophical level at which Bradley is arguing.

In this study, then, my aim is to clarify the main features of Bradley's moral philosophy, and in particular to justify a claim about the correct interpretation of "My Station and Its Duties". The reading of *Ethical Studies* I offer is important for the subsequent studies because it understands Bradley as the other British Idealists understood him.

The key to understanding any part of Bradley's moral philosophy is to heed his prefatory remark that the essays in *Ethical Studies* "are so far connected that, for the most part, they must be read in the order in which they stand".³ So we must work on the assumption that all the essays must be considered, and considered in order and in their connections with one another, before the meaning of any one of them can be fully grasped. One reason for this policy is that each essay presents ideas which bear upon those in the other essays, amplifying or qualifying them; the earlier essays, as one expects, prepare the way for the later, but also the later essays revise our understanding of the earlier. Another reason is that Bradley organises his arguments in a complicated way which links them across the boundaries apparently set by the divisions between essays. He does not simply examine a number of theories, show their inadequacies, and present his own; he treats other theories as a source from which to select material out of which, with additions of his own, and following a single involved plan through the entire book, he gradually builds up his own theory. This pattern of argument is more easily discerned in the earlier essays but is used throughout. Accordingly, besides working through the essays in order and outlining Bradley's main points, I shall note his method of presenting them. I must add that the complex style and structure of *Ethical Studies* mean that it must be approached with caution, and that any interpretation must be tentative in certain respects. This is especially true in the present case, where the discussion is selective. Nevertheless I believe that what follows does no injustice to Bradley's argument.

1. Bradley's approach to moral philosophy

Bradley himself declares in the Preface that his main object in *Ethical Studies* is to criticise and correct confused and false ideas which are "now current, especially in England" and which hinder "the apprehension of moral facts", rather than to construct a system of moral philosophy.¹ But of course this involves introducing his own ideas as well. Many of them appear in the opening essay, "The Vulgar Notion of Responsibility in Connexion with the Theories of Free-Will and Necessity".

The issue of free will had had a long history of unresolved controversy, and had divided Intuitionism and Utilitarianism, the two principal schools of English moral philosophy of the day.² The dispute raises fundamental questions which must be met by any moral philosophy and, for reasons

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10821-8 - The Political Philosophy of the British Idealists: Selected Studies

Peter P. Nicholson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

BRADLEY'S THEORY OF MORALITY

which will emerge, forms a particularly appropriate starting point for Bradley. Utilitarianism's position had been reasserted recently by J. S. Mill in a chapter of his widely discussed *Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy* (1865).³ As well as presenting a Necessitarian or Determinist case which draws extensively upon Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (section VII) and upon his own *System of Logic* (Book VI, Chapter II), Mill quotes extensively from the Libertarians or Indeterminists, Reid, Hamilton, and Mansel. This chapter supplies Bradley with much of the raw material for his own essay. He also follows Mill in discussing free will in connection with moral responsibility, punishment, and prediction. Bradley draws freely upon Mill's characterisations of the two positions, and ranges over the same issues but, typically, without concerning himself with who said exactly what.⁴ He is not trying to write a history of the controversy but to penetrate to the central philosophical question. He is not concerned to expound other philosophers' systems of ideas but to elucidate arguments by setting them out in dialectical patterns. This method, which Hegel of course employed very freely, has the disadvantage that sometimes fabricated and feeble arguments are dealt with, but it does enable Bradley to elicit by contrast certain facets of his position. We should also bear in mind that most of us use this method when we speak of what "the Idealist" or "the Utilitarian would argue" instead of citing what a particular writer actually writes. The method is not inherently bad, but it must be used with discretion, as it generally is by Bradley.

Bradley rejects both Mill's Determinism and his opponents' Indeterminism. He argues that neither of the current philosophical theories is satisfactory, because each is both one-sided and in conflict with "vulgar", that is ordinary, moral ideas. The "plain man" believes that for a man* to be morally responsible, and for what he does to be imputable to him, he "must act himself, be now the same man who acted, have been himself at the time of the act, have had sense enough to know what he was doing, and to know good from bad".⁵ Indeterminism, however, claiming that a man's acts are free in the sense of not being determined by anything at all, makes his acts unpredictable and thereby "annihilates the very conditions" of the ordinary notion of responsibility.⁶ For the vulgar think that acts issuing from a man's character can be predicted by those who understand him. Determinism, on the other hand, according to which all acts are caused and are in principle predictable, collides with the plain man's beliefs about accountability, about punishment, and about his own identity and his ability to form his own character.⁷ Having argued that each of the two great schools which divide English philosophy "stands out of relation to vulgar morality" and that "for both alike responsibility (as we believe in it) is a word altogether devoid of signification and impossible of explanation", Bradley ponders the conclusion to be drawn.⁸ Are we to "rest with the vulgar" and reject both philosophical theo-

*The British Idealists wrote in the language of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and in describing and assessing their work I have not attempted to translate their thought into the gender-neutral terminology we now prefer.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10821-8 - The Political Philosophy of the British Idealists: Selected Studies

Peter P. Nicholson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

STUDY I: SECTION 1

ries, or should we abandon the plain man and support one or other of the philosophies? These, according to English philosophy, are the only three choices. But none of them, Bradley contends, is satisfactory. The first is not a theory at all, and the others are defective: all three are partial and incomplete, and fail to provide a satisfactory theory which fits the facts of morality. We must seriously consider, therefore, a fourth possibility, a philosophy which reconciles the “undying and opposite one-sidednesses” of Indeterminism and Determinism, and further “which *thinks* what the vulgar *believe*”, that is, which is a theoretical account of ordinary moral ideas. Such a philosophy already exists outside England, Bradley notes, though English philosophers ignore it. He must mean Hegel.⁹

The project of reconciling Determinism and Indeterminism was not new to English philosophy. Hume and Mill thought that they had achieved it. But from Bradley’s viewpoint they had simply subordinated free will to necessity. On the other side, Hamilton believed that men are in fact morally free but that it is impossible to establish this philosophically because free will and necessity are one-sided yet theoretically balanced. For Bradley, however, this leaves a gap between the facts of morality and philosophical theory. Instead, Bradley wants to reconcile all three elements, both preserving the truth in Determinism and in Indeterminism whilst eliminating the error in each and showing that the result fits ordinary moral ideas. This programme and approach are obviously inspired by Hegel, and here the first essay displays one of the characteristic features of *Ethical Studies*. Bradley never simply repeats Hegel; he is always selective and critical, draws on other sources (sometimes discrepant; Schopenhauer, for instance), and adds a great deal of his own. This is widely accepted. “He is no mere borrower of other men’s ideas,” writes Cunningham of Bradley’s philosophy as a whole, “and, though there can be no doubt of the influence of German thinkers, particularly Hegel, Bradley’s construction is always his own.” As Bell says of *Ethical Studies*, “Bradley is nothing if not his own man, a distinctive voice aware of its distinctiveness.”¹⁰ At the same time as acknowledging his debts to Hegel, Bradley always denies he is a Hegelian.¹¹ Having noted this qualification, we can observe that *Ethical Studies* is generally agreed to be the most Hegelian of Bradley’s books; and, as Wollheim remarks, “this is true of the content and doctrine of the book, but truer still of its method which is in essentials dialectical”.¹² Bradley’s dialectic is in fact simpler than Hegel’s though plainly derived from it.¹³ The best way to understand Bradley’s dialectic is to observe it in action, and I have discussed several instances in what follows. Some general introductory remarks, however, may be helpful.

It is quite common to say that one must see both sides of the question, that different theories may each hold part of the truth, or that the truth lies somewhere midway between opposed theories. But there is more than this to Bradley’s method, which aims not only to show that there are various sides to a question but also to explain the way in which these sides are connected with one another. The central thought behind Bradley’s method, I think, is that certain ideas belong together and only make sense in terms of one an-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10821-8 - The Political Philosophy of the British Idealists: Selected Studies

Peter P. Nicholson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

BRADLEY'S THEORY OF MORALITY

other. These ideas form a unity (or, as Bradley calls it, a “concrete universal”), a whole of which each idea is a part (or, in Bradley’s language, a “moment” or “side” or “factor”).¹⁴ Each idea constituting the whole is distinguishable as a distinct idea but is not separable from its whole, because it gains part of its meaning from its membership of the whole and from the other constituent ideas. If an idea is isolated from its whole, it is misunderstood and distorted, and may seem to be antagonistic to the ideas with which it belongs. For instance, if we think solely of the ways in which human action is undetermined, or if we think solely of the ways in which it is determined, we produce Indeterminism and Determinism respectively; these one-sided theories each mistake one side of human action for the whole. The two sides must be reunited and their opposition transformed into mutual support (how this can be done in the particular case of the dialectic of Indeterminism and Determinism is discussed further in Section 3). By abstracting ideas from their whole, we render irreconcilable things that really belong together. Bradley’s method in *Ethical Studies* is to take the constituent ideas of a whole and show first how any philosophical theory erected on one of them must be unsatisfactory, and then how matters can be rectified by fitting the ideas together as interdependent parts of a whole. There is a further dimension. Any whole of ideas may, from another viewpoint, itself be one of the sides or moments of another whole.¹⁵ This means that it is possible to produce a cumulative argument in *Ethical Studies* in which each step is connected with the rest. As each whole is assembled, it can be shown to be a moment in the next whole, and the argument moves on. There are of course serious problems raised by such a dialectic, in particular how to identify what is a moment and which whole it belongs to, and where and how to make the transition from one whole to the next. Nonetheless Bradley has chosen to work out much of his argument in these terms, and we ignore this at our peril.¹⁶

Another characteristic feature of *Ethical Studies* which has already appeared is Bradley’s appeal to the moral facts of ordinary morality. He does not pretend that this is straightforward. Most moral philosophers claim that their theories accord with what ordinary people really believe; yet, as in the case of free will, their theories differ.¹⁷ This suggests that there are problems both over the identification of ordinary moral ideas and over their interpretation. Bradley thinks that to discover them we must turn to the ordinary man, whose beliefs are untarnished by theories of morality; but he admits that it is hard to find an unspoilt, uneducated plain man nowadays.¹⁸ Sometimes, too, it is hard to get to the ordinary man’s beliefs and to interpret them.¹⁹ It may be necessary to revise the plain man’s beliefs, since he may not see them clearly, and to restate them in terms which he would not understand.²⁰

In order to see how Bradley copes with these problems, we must understand the level at which he is arguing. He is not attempting a detailed description of the moral code of his society or an empirical survey of the convictions which people have on particular moral issues. He is, rather, concerned with the basic moral concepts of social life, ideas which constitute our way of life and which ordinary people live by even if they do not reflect upon or formu-